

The Jester Prince by dgalerab

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Genre: Alternate Universe - Fairy Tale, M/M, Mutual Pining, Pining Richie Tozier, Prince Eddie Kaspbrak, Rated For Language Mostly, True Love's Kiss

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Summary:

When a group of evil wizards try to kidnap Eddie, Richie takes his place.

Eddie, naturally, decides to rescue him.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

"ain, you have two wips, why are you starting another???" you ask, to which i say, "I WILL GET THERE WHEN I GET THERE AND ANYWAY THE ROADTRIP FIC WAS AIMLESS AND DIDN'T HAVE AN OBVIOUS END SO I HAVEN'T REALLY ABANDONED ANY COMMITMENT ANYWAY, HAVE I?"

anyway here's this

Eddie woke to a frantic shaking.

"Eddie! Eddie!" someone hissed.

Eddie groaned. He knew it had to only person who'd dare climb into his bed and shake him like some kind of blanket that needed dusting, and he wasn't at all prepared for his antics. "Go away, Richie," he mumbled.

"I'm not fucking around, Eds, we've gotta go!" Richie hissed, with a tone that was sharper than his usual teasing.

Eddie cracked open one eye. "What?"

"Come *on*," Richie snapped, dragging him out of bed. He was wearing something not unlike Eddie's usual clothes, probably stolen from wherever Queen Sonia kept Eddie's late father's clothes.

"What are you wearing?" Eddie asked, but Richie was already shoving him towards his wardrobe. "What the fuck?"

"Just get in the wardrobe," Richie said, wrenching open the door and pressing Eddie inside. "Don't make a noise and don't come out of there, no matter what happens."

"But..." Eddie tried, spluttering when Richie shoved a coat over him and pressed him further inside.

“Promise!” Richie demanded. “Promise me you won’t make a noise, Eds!”

Eddie has never seen Richie look so serious. He nods.

“Promise!” Richie hisses, glancing over his shoulder.

“I promise,” Eddie managed.

Richie nodded sharply, then closed the door.

Eddie scrambled around to look through the keyhole as Richie threw himself on the bed and pretended to be asleep. The door slammed open a moment later, and Eddie put a hand over his mouth to keep from yelping.

Richie feigned waking up in alarm as three hooded figures surged inside. “What is the meaning of this?” Richie yelled.

Eddie resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Even in such a serious situation, Richie was mocking him.

“Prince Edward, I presume?” one hooded figure asked.

“No, the court jester,” Richie snapped. “What do you think? Who the hell are *you*?”

“Take him,” the hooded figure said, and his two companions grabbed Richie.

Eddie nearly cried out in alarm, but he had promised. Besides, if they found him now, either he’d be killed, or they’d find out Richie wasn’t the prince and *he’d* be killed. He crouched inside the wardrobe and tried to breathe.

Richie snarled, kicking and biting, but the lead hooded figure put a hand over his face, and suddenly Richie went limp.

Eddie stifled a whimper.

One of the figures threw Richie over his shoulder like a ragdoll, and they headed out.

Eddie tried to calm his heartbeat. Richie wasn't dead. They wouldn't have taken a body. He had to be alive. Probably under some kind of enchantment or spell or...

He had to go get help. He had to, but he couldn't move. He was shaking and sweaty. He wasn't sure what was scarier - the fact that if it wasn't for Richie, he'd be the one who would have been taken, or the fact that he didn't know where they were taking Richie. What would happen if they realized they'd taken the wrong person? Would they hurt Richie? Kill him?

He should have burst out of the wardrobe and done something while they were distracted subduing him.

But he hadn't.

He'd just watched them take his only friend.

He collapsed into the pile of boots on the bottom of the wardrobe and sobbed quietly to himself until the sun came up.

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"You're not even going to *look* for him?" Eddie blurted.

"He's a court jester," Queen Sonia said. "Hardly worth mobilizing the guard over, especially when those fiends could try again. They're staying here to protect you."

"Richie protected me!" Eddie shouted. "If not for him, they would have taken me!"

"And it's very noble of him to give his life in service of the crown," Sonia said, though even that was dismissive. She'd never liked Richie. She was probably glad he was gone. "His family will be compensated fairly."

"You—!" Eddie said, swallowing down his words in rage. "You can't be serious!"

"I am deadly serious," Sonia replied. "And I don't want you out on the grounds until this is over. You stay in the castle and under armed

guard until these men are caught.”

Eddie let out a loud, angry noise and stormed back to his room, slamming the door in the faces of the guards stationed right outside it.

He'd just have to take care of this himself.

He grabbed the sheets off the mattress and started knotting them together. He tested the strength of the knots by yanking at them.

This is crazy, he thought. You're going to get yourself killed, and then who will take the throne?

He shook his head. No. Richie was in trouble, all because he'd tried to protect Eddie, and there was no other choice but to go after him.

He tied the makeshift rope to the bedpost, watched the patrol under his window go by, then dropped the other end out of the window, clambering down it. He managed a few good steps down, shifting his hands carefully, then slipped, crashing into the ground.

His breath left his body, but he managed to roll into the shadows before the guards came running back to check on the noise.

“Dammit,” one of the guards said. “The prince has climbed out his window. Find him, before his mother learns of it.”

“Damn that child,” the other guard said, as they both ran off.

Eddie huffed to himself. He was twenty years old. He was not a child by any means.

He waited for the thundering of boots to die out, then poked his head out. The courtyard was empty.

He ran down to the stables.

He was realizing he hadn't packed any provisions, but he supposed he could probably forage for food. He'd spent enough time reading while being holed up in his room, after all.

He crept into the stables.

He wasn't sure if most princes knew how to saddle their own horse, but Eddie barely knew how to ride. His mother had let him learn, but she never let him go out on hunts or riding on his own like the other princes did.

He grabbed a saddle, trying to haul it up against the horse. It was so much heavier than he'd been expecting, and even with both arms he couldn't get it up onto its back. He fumbled, shoving his back against it, which was the point where he realized that he wasn't alone.

Two stable boys were watching him fight the saddle onto the horse.

"You should probably be careful," one said, "or she'll bite."

"Right," Eddie said, looking at the horse. She looked at him with a wild look in her eyes. "Thanks."

"And maybe put it on sideways," the stable boy said. "And slide it up."

Eddie tried that, but even so it wouldn't slide onto the horse's back. He shushed the horse, watching it nervously. If anything, that made the horse seem even more antsy.

"Are you even supposed to be riding, sire?" the other stable boy said.

They weren't really boys - they seemed about his age, but Eddie didn't know what else to call them. "No, I'm not," Eddie said. "But if you tell my mother, I'll have you executed."

"Oh, well, that's not an overreaction or anything," the ruder man said.

"Not that it's any of your business," Eddie said haughtily, "but I am rescuing my friend."

"What friend?" the nicer stable boy asked.

Eddie groaned. He sounded ridiculous. He didn't even know if Richie liked him or if he just pretended because Eddie was the actual crown

prince, but Eddie liked Richie, so it counted. “He was my servant, alright? But he’s *also* my friend. And he got himself kidnapped in my place and now my mother won’t send out a search party, so I’m going to go get him myself because—”

“You mean Richie?” the ruder boy asked, sitting up suddenly.

Eddie grunted as the saddle fell on him. “Yes, I mean Richie,” he snapped. “What do you care?”

The man was over the gate in a flash, helping him with the saddle. “I care,” he snapped. “Go home to your nice warm room, we’ll get Richie.”

“No?” Eddie said, too startled to be as angry as he wanted to be. “No, I’m coming with you!”

“The guards are watching all the exits,” the man replied. “They’ll all be looking for you. You’ll just slow us down. So get out.”

“But,” Eddie said, feeling himself go hot. “But I—”

“Go on, you’ll get your servant back,” the man growled at him.

“I’m not going anywhere!” Eddie shouted. “I’ll... don’t you have any spare clothes?”

“There’s a change of clothes over th-there in the chest,” the other man said.

“Uh... yes,” Eddie managed, heading over to find the clothes. They smelled like dirt and horse, and he gagged. “These smell gross.”

“Yeah. Either leave them there and go home, or suck it up,” the angry man snapped.

“Stan,” his friend chided. “Don’t be m-mean.”

Eddie glared at Stan, holding his eyes as he changed out of his clothes and tugged on the dirty clothes with a shudder. “I’m coming,” he said firmly.

The other one, not-Stan, sighed and helped saddle up a horse.

“Why?” Stan hissed at him. “What does it matter to you?”

“It... He’s my... It was my fault he was taken, so I’m going after him! Why are *you* going after him?” Eddie retorted.

“Because I’ve been Richie’s best friend since we were six,” Stan said.

Eddie’s heart twisted a little. He hadn’t realized Richie had other friends. Richie was *his* only friend, and now it turned out Eddie wasn’t even Richie’s *best* friend. Still, he wasn’t going to abandon him. He took deep breaths - not that it helped with the smell - and waited for Stan to saddle two other horses.

“I’m Bill, by the w-way,” the other stable boy said.

“Let me guess, you’ve also been Richie’s friend since you were six?” Eddie muttered.

Bill nodded. “Yes. But d-don’t worry, he talks about you often.”

“Like how annoying a master I am?” Eddie asked, hugging himself.

Bill smiled softly. “No,” he said. “N-Not at all like that.”

“Oh,” Eddie said, feeling a little relieved.

“That’s because Richie’s an idiot,” Stan muttered under his breath. “I’m surprised you even have the guts to go after him at all.”

Eddie gaped at him. “You didn’t... I... I’m the *prince*, I could have your head...!” he choked out.

Stan rolled his eyes. “Get on the horse, your highness,” he said, with the least amount of respect anyone could put on the words. “And don’t hurt yourself.”

Bill sighed. “Don’t mind Stan. He gets p-protective, is all.”

Eddie huffed, but he clambered into the saddle (albeit with some difficulty) all the same.

“Can we go now?” Stan asked.

Eddie nodded, urging his horse forward.

It took off in a gallop.

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Richie jolted awake, cold and disoriented. His head hurt like a *bitch*.

“Don’t try to move too quickly,” a voice said, and he jerked away.

Last he remembered, he was being snatched, and now here he was, in some damp dungeon. His arms and legs were shackled at the wrists and ankles too. But at least it wasn’t Eddie.

“Who the fuck are you?” he asked.

“You sure are foulmouthed for a prince,” the voice said, attached to a vaguely human blob.

Richie couldn’t see. Where were his glasses? “Not all princes are prim and proper, you know,” Richie said, squinting in the hopes of seeing his glasses in the dark.

“Oh!” the voice exclaimed. “Sorry. You’re probably looking for these.”

His glasses were pressed onto his face, and the blob became a redhead girl. “Oh,” he said. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she said.

She wasn’t shackled, which was suspicious, but she was wearing a collar around her neck with a glowing charm.

“Again,” Richie said. “Who the fuck are you? *M'lady*?”

“I’m Beverly,” the girl said. “And I can’t get you out of here, before you ask.” She tapped the charm on her throat. “But if you need anything, I might be able to get it for you. Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“Not really,” Richie mumbled. “But I have an awful headache.”

“You’ve been enchanted for at least a day,” she said. “But don’t worry - it’ll pass.”

Richie narrowed his eyes at her. “How do I know I can trust you?”

“You don’t,” she said, smiling wryly. “But you’re the first person I’ve been able to talk to for a while that’s not literally evil, so I’d prefer it if you didn’t go off and sulk suspiciously in a corner. If you don’t mind?”

Richie looked her up. “Okay. Fair enough. Do you know why I’m here?”

“They don’t let me overhear much,” she admitted. “But they’re preparing some curse. They need a prince’s heart.”

Richie raised an eyebrow. “Like, literally?”

She shrugged in apology. “I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

Richie let out a puff of air. “Oh,” he said. “Okay, well... Glad I got to meet you before I die, I guess?”

“I... I’ve been trying to think of a way to get you out of here. I can try to get a message to someone about you,” she said. “I have a... a friend. But he doesn’t come by often, and I don’t know if the charm will let me say anything to him.”

Richie checked the shackles. The chains were long enough to let him around the whole room, but they looked charmed too. They were probably unbreakable. “That’d be a start,” he said. “And at any rate, thanks for trying.”

“Your mom is probably going to send people looking for you,” she said. “Right?”

Richie laughed bitterly. If Sonia was in charge, there wouldn’t be a single soul looking for him. *Maybe*, if Eddie had the nerve to defy his mother, there would be a small amount of guards out looking for him, but they probably wouldn’t be very dedicated in finding a court jester-turned-manservant.

And that was assuming Eddie would even want to look for him.

But he couldn't exactly admit that, could he?

"Yeah," he murmured. "Searching frantically, for sure."

She nodded. "I'll stay with you until the headache goes away. Then I'll try to write to my friend."

He returned the nod, shivering.

"Here," she said, holding her arms out. "I can help with the cold at least a little."

"Thanks," he said, curling up against her. She was warm, and he found himself drifting back off to sleep.

At least Eddie was safe, he told himself as he drifted off.

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"I'm going to die," Eddie moaned.

"You're not going to die," Stan said.

"This inn is a death trap," Eddie muttered. "There was a guy downstairs with a chicken. That he was just holding? In a bar! There's probably at least five people downstairs with the plague, living with animals and and and... and lepers! I think I saw a leper!"

"Shut up," Stan said. "I have a friend we can talk to. If anyone's heard anything about the people who took Richie, he'll probably know."

"How many friends do you have?" Eddie muttered darkly.

"More than one," Stan retorted. "Anyway. He's a travelling salesman."

"Great," Eddie said. "Does *he* have the plague?"

"Shut up about the plague!"

“G-Guys!” Bill shouted. “Stop f-fighting.” He sighed. “I’m going to get some food. W-Work it out, or you’re just going to slow us d-down!”

He stormed off, slamming the door behind himself.

“Why do you hate me?” Eddie blurted.

“Maybe because you’re a spoiled asshole who tells my best friend he isn’t funny and orders him around all day?” Stan said dryly. “And now you got him kidnapped. Did you tell him to switch places with you?”

“Of course I didn’t!” Eddie snapped. “It was his idea!”

“And I suppose you were very relieved,” Stan huffed.

“I didn’t know what he was doing!” Eddie yelled. “And he made me promise to stay put. He’d have been killed if they’d realized he wasn’t the prince.”

“He could still be killed!” Stan shouted back.

“He’s my *friend*,” Eddie snapped. “The only one I have. I would have never made him take my place if I’d realized!”

“Your *friend*?” Stan shouted. “He’s not your friend just because you keep him with you all day and night and make him entertain only you!”

“Would you rather he exhaust himself all the time entertaining guests who will barely look at him?” Eddie shouted. Richie enjoyed his little magic tricks and charms, but Eddie had seen him dead on his feet too many times after long, gruesome dinners where people hardly even looked at the colorful little fireworks Richie could conjure in his palms or the magnificent flowers he could pull out of his sleeves. “And I don’t make him perform at night anyway!”

“I’ve talked to the servants who live in the servants quarters, they say Richie doesn’t go back there every night, and I know for a fact he doesn’t go anywhere but there or to our house!”

“That’s because he has to go through the courtyard to get to the

servants quarters, so when it's raining he stays in my bed, *asshole*," Eddie growled, crossing his arms.

"Then why is he stealing from the kitchens all the time?" Stan yelled. "You barely feed him!"

"I don't know!" Eddie yelled back. "I give him all the delicacies I can get my hands on to bring back to him. He loves those little lemoncakes, those are his favorite."

Stan paused. "Those are *my* favorite," he gritted out. "He brings them to me."

"Well, I didn't know that!" Eddie shouted. "Then what's *his* favorite?"

"I don't know!" Stan replied. He took a deep breath. "God, that idiot."

"Excuse me?" Eddie growled.

"He must have lied to us so we wouldn't get in any trouble if anyone else found out about favoritism," Stan sighed.

"Oh," Eddie said, trying to rearrange his brain to make room for logic beside all the anger.

"You really let him sleep in your bed?" Stan said, crossing his arms.

"Yes," Eddie muttered. "Don't tell my mother, she'd have a fit."

Stan scoffed. "Fine. So you're not the worst. But if anything happens to Richie, it's still your fault."

"Fine," Eddie snapped. "I *know* that, fuckhead."

They glared at each other until Bill's return interrupted them.

"Are y-you two going to behave?" Bill asked. "We h-have work to do."

They glared daggers at each other, but they both nodded and mumbled their apologies.

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Richie woke to a gentle hand on his head.

“Hey,” Bev said softly.

“Good morning, my dear fellow captive,” Richie teased.

She smiled, which felt like a little bit of a victory. “Want some hot broth?”

Richie nodded, pushing himself into sitting. She pressed a mug into his hands, helping him lift it to his lips.

“It’s freezing in here,” he said. “Aren’t you freezing your tits off in that dress?”

“You get used to it,” she replied.

“Well, that sounds like a real shit way to live,” Richie replied.

She snorted, grinning wide. “You really don’t talk like a prince.”

“And I tell you again, my good lady, sometimes princes are foulmouthed little bastards,” Richie said. This was true. Eddie could curse just as hard and twice as fierce as Richie. True, Richie had taught him a lot of it, but Eddie had taken to it like a fish to water.

She laughed. “Alright, alright,” she said. “Heads up, by the way. I think my father is back today.”

“Your father?” Richie asked.

She nodded. “The one who took you. The one that wants your heart.”

“Is he the ‘tear it straight out of my chest still beating’ type?” Richie asked nervously.

She grimaced. “I’m afraid so.”

“Oh, good,” Richie sighed. “This broth was a terrible last meal.”

She smiled bitterly. “Best I could do.”

“It’s not your fault,” Richie muttered. “And hey. After I die, I hope you’ll get free someday.”

She blinked at him, eyes going round and lip wobbling. “Thanks. I... I wish I could help.”

The door slammed open, making Richie jump despite his best efforts.

The hooded man stood over him.

Beverly stood, putting herself between Richie and the man, planting her bare feet on the cold ground. “Father, please,” she said. “There has to be another way. He’s a good man.”

“Bevvie,” the man said. She flinched when he touched her face, and Richie *hated* this guy. “You’re too naive. This is merely the price of power.”

He put up his hand and the charm on her throat glowed bright, forcing her step by slow step out of the man’s way.

“Come, Prince Edward,” the man said. “It’s time to go.”

He grabbed Richie by his hair, the chains vanishing from the walls and reappearing between Richie’s ankles and wrists. He wouldn’t be able to run like this, and the grip in his hair made it impossible to bite.

Bev stared at him, tears in her eyes, unable to move her feet despite her struggles. He smiled at her, in what he hoped was a comforting manner, and let himself be pushed out the door.

The next room had a large circle drawn across the floor, candles lighting the room from every shelf.

Richie was shoved into the circle, the shackles on his wrists and ankles snapping together so his arms were behind his back as he was forced to his knees by the man.

“Nice art, did you do it yourself?” Richie asked.

“Quiet,” the man said.

Around them, several robed figures had gathered in the shadows, chanting loudly.

Richie opened his mouth to interrupt them, but a sharp slap stopped him, nearly knocking off his glasses.

He went quiet, but he kept glowering at the leader.

“Now,” the man said. “For the final step...”

He thrust his hand forward, and Richie squeezed his eyes shut. Fingers dug into his chest, painful, but not tear-your-still-beating-heart-out painful. Richie opened one eye carefully.

The man sighed. “You’re not the prince.”

“How dare you,” Richie said, but his mouth went dry. The game was up, and that meant Eddie was in danger again. “I’m the most princely prince.”

“I should have known it wouldn’t be so easy,” the man muttered darkly. “Prince Edward is well known for his cowardice...”

“He’s not a coward,” Richie snapped before he could stop himself.

The silence in the room was suddenly deafening.

“Hold his head,” the man - Dickhead, as Richie wanted to call him - snapped.

A hand came up to hold his head tightly as Dickhead wandered off to get a bottle from one of the shelves. He uncorked the bottle and loomed over Richie.

Richie pressed his lips shut, but whoever was holding his head pinched his nose shut. He couldn’t breathe, and it was only a matter of time before he would have to open his mouth, but he wasn’t going to give up easy.

His vision went dark, and his lungs forced his mouth open without his consent. He didn’t get much relief before a sickly sweet liquid was being poured into his mouth and Dickhead pushed his mouth shut

and clamped his hand over it.

Richie tried to twist away, but he couldn't move his head. He was dizzy and his lungs burned - he didn't have a choice but to swallow.

He swallowed.

The men let go of his head, and he dragged in as much oxygen as he could. He hadn't yet turned into a frog or anything, which was a good sign, Richie thought.

“What’s your name?” Dickhead asked.

“Richard Tozier,” Richie said, “but people call me Richie.”

He blinked. He hadn't meant to... His eyes widened, the realization setting in.

“And who are you, Richard?” Dickhead asked.

“I used to be the court jester,” Richie said, trying to shut his mouth. But he couldn't. The words were just coming out unbidden. “But then Eddie ordered me to be his personal manservant, so now I’m that.”

“And did he order you to switch places with him?”

“He’d never do that,” Richie snapped. That much he actually wanted to say. “It was my idea.”

“Why?”

“Because I love him more than anything,” Richie said, feeling his stomach drop through the floor. *No, no, no...* “But he doesn’t feel the same way, so don’t bother using me as a hostage.”

“I see,” Dickhead said. “We’ll have to change the curse a bit, but we can work with that. It might even be better...”

Richie furrowed his brow. “What are you...?”

The man scuffed up a part of the circle with his shoe and pulled out a bit of chalk to redraw it. He did the same five more times, then

returned to Richie.

Richie stared at him, wide-eyed. "Um," he tried, "please don't tear my heart out Mr. Hood Man?"

The man put one hand on his shoulder. The chanting had started again.

This was very, very bad.

Dickhead's hand plunged into his chest. This time, it went straight through the surface with a sickly green glow.

This time, Richie screamed.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

drags myself in several days later

i haven't forgotten this fic i just don't know how to
uhhhhhh make it be... good?

“Is your friend coming any time soon?” Eddie snapped. “It’s been forever.”

“It’s been m-m-minutes,” Bill replied.

Eddie threw up his hands. “Minutes in which God knows what could have happened to Richie!”

“We’re not in the palace anymore,” Stan muttered. “Not everyone is waiting on you hand and foot here.”

“I thought you wanted to find Richie too!”

“I do,” Stan said. “And I’m fine with you coming. But I still don’t like you.”

“What the fuck,” Eddie said, then shrieked when a cart splashed mud at him. He already wanted a bath.

Stan rolled his eyes. “Spoiled brat.”

“I’m going to remember you when we get back to the palace,” Eddie said.

“Good!”

“Fine!”

When Eddie got back to the palace, he’d have bars on his windows. His mother would dress up the dungeon for him and shove him in there and throw away the key. He’d never do anything ever again and...

And Richie was definitely going to be moved elsewhere. Hopefully somewhere nice, like maybe the kitchens or the stables with his terrible friends, but Eddie was definitely not going to see him again until his mother died.

He felt sick to his stomach, and not just from the slop they'd eaten or the mud on his clothes.

"Bill!" a voice shouted.

Eddie perked up.

"Mikey!" Bill cried back, spreading his arms to wrap them around the newcomer.

Stan waved at him too. "Sorry, don't mean to be rude—"

"... There's a first..." Eddie muttered.

--but could we hurry this along?" Stan continued, paying him no heed. "I'm worried about Richie."

"*We're* worried about Richie," Eddie corrected.

"Right, yeah," Mike said. "Sorry, I don't know you."

"Eddie," Eddie said. "Um. Eddie..." He couldn't think of a fake name. "Tozier?"

Stan squinted at him. "He *knows* Richie, you idiot. Could you not think of another last name?"

"No I could not," Eddie said, trying to preserve his dignity by saying it with as much force as he could.

"He's the fucking crown prince," Stan muttered to Mike. "And for some reason, he's demanded to come along."

"For some... He's my *friend!*" Eddie shouted. "And I'm worried about him, jackass!"

"G-Guys!" Bill yelled. "Stan, seriously, c-cut it out. I thought you

were over th-this.”

“Yeah, I thought you were in a hurry, Stan,” Mike said, eyes glittering with amusement.

Stan huffed. “Yeah, yeah, he’s not the *worst*. What can you tell us, Mike?”

“Not much, I’m afraid,” Mike said, growing serious. “There’s always rumors about where the latest crop of dark wizards is hiding out, but that’s not much to go off of.”

“It’s something,” Stan said. “How many places are on the list?”

“About four,” Mike said.

Eddie let out a nervous breath.

“But only one where I know someone who can confirm the rumors,” Mike said. “So if we want to place bets...”

“We’re betting on Richie’s life,” Eddie interjected.

Stan sighed. “I hate to say it, but Eddie is right,” he said, like he’d tasted something bitter.

“Stan,” Mike chided. “Really? From his stories, Richie really likes Eddie, why are you being a brat?”

“Richie’s an idiot,” Stan said. “And sure, Eddie’s not as bad as I thought, but Richie could still do better than...” He seemed to realize that this wasn’t something he should be saying for some reason, and quickly covered it with, “He told Richie he wasn’t funny!”

“You don’t think he’s f-funny either,” Bill said.

“You don’t?” Eddie blurted. “He’s hilarious!”

Stan stared at him. “What?”

“Did he think I was serious? When I called him not funny?” Eddie said. “Because I wasn’t and I thought he knew.”

“Dammit,” Stan snapped. “Stop proving me wrong!” He huffed. “Might actually have to like you, and then Richie’s going to be...” He trailed off into mumbling.

Eddie gaped at him.

“Stan,” Mike said. “Focus.”

“Right, right,” Stan said. “I suppose if we have nothing else to go on... would your friend be able to tell us anything about other dark wizards? Maybe give us a lead?”

“I can’t guarantee it,” Mike said. “But I think so. He mentioned something like an inside man.”

“Then he’s our best bet.” Stan’s face softened slightly as he looked at Eddie. “What do you think?”

“Oh, suddenly you care?” Eddie muttered at him. He gritted his teeth. “But I agree.”

“Great,” Mike said. “Come on, Bill, help me load up my bag.”

Stan turned to face Eddie. He wasn’t as tall as Richie, but he was taller than Eddie, and Eddie didn’t care for it. “What?” he snapped.

“Alright, fine,” Stan said. “So I’m sorry.”

Eddie gaped at him. “What?”

“It’s just you’re really important to Richie,” Stan said. “And the idea of someone so important to him not caring about him as much as they should is infuriating to me.”

Eddie wanted to argue further, but he could understand the sentiment. Richie was gentle and goofy and Eddie’s blood had boiled every time he’d watched people ignore Richie and his joking. “I suppose I can understand that.”

“So you really care about him?” Stan asked. “Like, seriously, not as some kind of pet or toy or worker drone?”

“Yes,” Eddie said. “Why do you think I’m here?!”

“I don’t know!” Stan said. “I just...! I worry about him! Someone’s got to! He’s got no sense of self-preservation when it comes to falling... When it comes to people he cares about.”

“Well, fine,” Eddie grumbled. “Good. But stop snapping at *me* about it, I feel the same way!”

“I will,” Stan mumbled. “But if anything happens to him, I’m serious, I’ll kill you, even if I get executed for it.”

“I won’t know how to live with myself if anything happens to him anyway,” Eddie admitted. “So *fine*.”

**

Richie’s chest hurt.

He was surprised he was alive, even though it took him several long minutes to really wake up.

Bev was crying, but not over him. Her back was turned, from what Richie could see.

He couldn’t form words, but he managed a choked sound.

She whirled around. “Oh, shit,” she said. “Your glasses. They were... one second...”

A moment later, she was sliding them onto his face. He tried to adjust them, but he couldn’t move his arms more than an inch.

“Don’t try to move,” Bev said. “But I need your help.” She pressed something thin and wooden into his hand. “Can you hold that?”

He tried, but it slid out of his hand. His body wasn’t responding to him right. Breathing hurt, and something was very off.

“Shit,” Bev said. “Okay, hang on, rest a couple more seconds and then we’ll... we’ll try again.” She pulled a paper closer, setting her hand against it with the object - a pencil, Richie realized sluggishly -

and pressed her foot against her hand with an angry noise. The charm on her throat lit up, and she threw the pencil down. “Fuck!”

“What’re you...?” Richie managed, before collapsing into wheezing.

“I’m trying to tell my friend what’s going on,” Bev said. “He even made it easier for me, but this stupid charm won’t let me...!”

Richie moved his fingers awkwardly, letting her press the pencil into it. This time, he managed to keep a hold of it. “Woo,” he managed, chuckling weakly. Laughing hurt.

“Okay. Can you see the paper?” she asked, rolling him to the side and helping him tilt his head down.

She nodded, handing him the paper. “I told him that there was someone like me here,” Bev said. “It was the best I could do, and this is what he wrote back.”

He squinted at it.

Do you mean:

- *Another prisoner?*
- A charmed person?
- A sibling?
- More dangerous magicians?

“You want me to mark...?” Richie mumbled.

Bev nodded. “You know which one, I’m guessing.”

Richie sloppily scrawled an X next to the “other prisoner” option.

“Yes!” Bev cheered under her breath. “Good job.” She stroked his hair out of his face. “Oh, I hope this helps.”

“For me?” Richie teased. He smiled instead of laughing, because his chest really hurt. “You shouldn’t have.”

“I’ll try to deliver this note after dark,” she said. “Until then, can I help with anything?”

“Is there a hole in my chest?” Richie asked. “Does it look cool?”

“There’s not,” she said. “Turns out, it was a metaphorical heart. Which is good, because you’re still alive, but bad because you’re also kind of cursed now. At least, as far as I know.”

“M’not a prince, though,” Richie mumbled.

Bev nodded. “I overheard,” she said. “But technically... your heart... is a prince’s. As in, belonging to a prince.”

“Oh, fucking bullshit,” Richie managed. What a fucking dumb as balls loophole. “Shit!”

“Magic is like that,” Bev said, with a wry smile. It faded quickly. “And... I... I think it’s only going to get worse. But hopefully, my friend can get help.”

“God, I’m so fucking cold,” Richie said. “And it *hurts*.”

Her face twisted with worry. “I know.” She laid down next to him. “I don’t have any blankets, but I can hold you.”

“I suppose that’ll have to do,” Richie mumbled, rolling over as best he could to settle into her arms. “Thanks.”

“Least I can do,” she said softly. She wasn’t much warmer than the room, but at least it was something.

**

Eddie snorted awake, spitting in horror as he realized the horse’s mane had slid into his mouth in his sleep. “Ugh!” he whined. “Ew.”

“I’m just impressed you didn’t fall off the horse,” Stan said.

“How long are you going to be mean to me?” Eddie snapped.

“This is a friendly meanness,” Stan informed him.

“Oh, really?” Eddie said, trying to wipe off his tongue. “So this is how you treat Richie too?”

“Yep.”

“Maybe *you’re* the bad friend,” Eddie muttered.

“I take care of him,” Stan said, shrugging lazily.

“So do I,” Eddie grumbled.

“Good for you.”

Eddie spat at him too, cracking his neck. He was sore all over. He’d never ridden this long and he’d certainly never slept on something so uncomfortable as a horse. He probably had bruises on his thighs by now. His mother would pitch a fit.

Of course, his mother would pitch a fit over so many things, the bruises would get lost in the mix. That, frankly, made Eddie feel a lot better about them.

Eddie looked around. They’d gotten to a part of the path that looked completely different from the rolling hills he was used to. Forests and thick brambles surrounded them, and everything was dark. It couldn’t have been evening yet, since there was no way he’d slept that long, but it was as dark as twilight.

“Is it always so dark in these woods?” Eddie asked.

“No,” Mike said. “This is something different.”

“I guess we know there’s *something* happening here...” Stan muttered, shivering.

Something snapped in the underbrush, and Eddie startled, swallowing. “Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Stan muttered. “I don’t like this at all.”

“Do you think Richie’s alright?” Eddie whispered.

Stan’s face finally softened a little. “I’m sure he’s waiting for us, wherever he is.”

Eddie let out a slow breath and nodded.

**

“Knock knock,” Bev said.

Richie tried to open his eyes and gave up halfway there. “Who’s the--”

“Moo,” she said, then a moment later, “Interrupting cow.”

“That’s funny,” Richie said, although he didn’t feel any amusement. He knew it was funny, but he just felt cold and faded.

He was pretty sure Bev was trying to make him laugh, but he didn’t feel much about that either. Her fingers combing through his hair didn’t make any dent in the numbness spreading through him.

She said something else, but he couldn’t follow the words.

“Richie,” she said, her voice sounding distant.

He should respond, he thought. Probably.

But he was so tired. He couldn’t open his eyes, or move, and she sounded so far away and he couldn’t make sense of her words or the undercurrent of emotion in them.

He let himself drift into the numbness overcoming him.

**

Eddie nearly shrieked as another branch snapped beside them, this time nearby, but Mike merely stopped and looked at the new figure that had joined them. “Hey,” he said, relieved.

Eddie stayed close to Bill and Stan, watching the new man warily. He was tall, with gentle eyes and hair that fell into them. “Hi,” the man said. “Who are your friends?”

“This is Eddie, Stan and Bill,” Mike said. “Guys, this is Ben.”

Ben waved at them, awkward. “Nice to meet you. You were looking for me?”

Mike nodded, moving to explain.

“We’re looking for someone,” Eddie blurted. “He was taken a few days ago by some fucking wizards or something. He’s about this tall,” he showed it with his hand, “with messy black hair and--”

“Okay, um, I haven’t seen them,” the man said, “but the mages in the nearby fort have a new prisoner.”

He stretched out his hand to show them a small note. It was a list of options, with a shaky mark next to “another prisoner.”

“Why’s it like that?” Eddie asked. The mark looked like it had been left by a child, wobbly lines surrounded by odd scratches with smudged graphite stains.

“I’ve been talking to the other prisoner in that tower through notes for a few months now,” Ben explained. “They’re charmed or cursed somehow. They can’t leave and they can’t give me specific information. All they could tell me is that they weren’t alone anymore, so I tried to help them tell me more.”

“The marks are all over the place,” Stan said.

“It’s possible even marking the right option would have been impossible for them,” Ben said. “They might have had the other prisoner do it after some failed attempts?”

Eddie looked at the shaky X over the right option. Had that been Richie? Richie’s handwriting wasn’t the neatest, but...

“If that’s tr-true,” Bill said, “then Richie must be hurt.”

Ben nodded. “My friend said they were scared,” he said. “They’ve never said anything like that before, so I can only assume they meant scared for whoever’s with them.”

“Then we have to go get him!” Eddie snapped.

“I’ve been working on a way to get up there since I got the first note,” Ben said. “It’s heavily warded. And... I feel like I should point out, it might not be your friend.”

“It has to be,” Stan said. “And we have to get past the wards. Soon.”

“The thing is,” Ben said, “I think they’ve been getting stronger. Since I got *this* note.”

Eddie growled loudly. “It doesn’t matter! We have to go get him!”

Ben sighed. “I’ll show you the wards.”

Eddie grit his teeth. He was going to claw through the wards with his bare hands if he had to. “Great,” he said, kicking his horse into gear. “Let’s go.”

Notes for the Chapter:

ben: yeah i've been trying to get up to that tower for a while but

eddie, completely fucking feral: have you used your teeth and nails yet because

Author's Note:

please validate me and my poor life choices